Interview with
Antonio Martinez
Cucamonga, California
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I have lived in this community since 1919. I was born and reared a Catholic, but, then I was converted to Protestanism. For many years I have had an evangelical mission here in the barrio; and for the past 14 years I have been going around to the bracero camps preaching the Gospel. I don't try to convert them to our particular church, you understand, I just try to convert them to true christianity. I believe that a real christian should read the Bible for himself and thing about it for himself; rather than taking the word of anyone man or any one group or any one religion. So, when I go to the camps, this is the message that I preach. We usually begin by singing a few hymns and then I make my little sermon on the subject of the Bible. We do not take up a colledtion at the camps.

We get many letters from braceros who have returned to Mexico, telling us how much they appreciate our message and telling us, in many cases, that they see thing in a new light now. That is the only sort of conversion we seek. We don't care if they join the Methodist church, or the Presbyterian church or what. Naturally, when we get letters of this kind which indicate that we have not been working in vain, it makes us feels very good inside.

The manager of the Cucamong camp has been very nice to us. He gave us permission to go into the camp and hold our services there, so long as we stayed in one particular place. As a matter of fact, we prefer to hold our services outside the camp across the road where there is a grove of eucalyptus trees. It seems to us that this is a much nicer place to hold services and the men seem to like it more. I would say that we get about 100 men from the Cucamonga camp coming across the road to our meetings. Now it is different at the San Antonio Camp, there the camp management will

not allow us inside the camp. I think it is because the local priest in Pomona has a great deal of influence with the camp manager, and the priest opposes what we are trying to do. There are people doing similar work to mine, who go to the camps at Riverside, Casa Blanca, Corona, and so forth. As far as our local congregation is concerned, we get 50 or 60 people into our church every week. We hold services during the day Sunday, Sunday evenings, and also Thursday evenings. We visit the bracero camps on Sunday afternoons.

You ask about the impact of the Bracero Program upon the local community. The impact has been tremendous. Just look at the situation. The braceros come by the thousands, they come alone without their families. I don't see how they could help but have a lowering effect on the morals of the community. There is a great deal of drinking. The bars and liquor stores in this area have had more business since the Bracero Program than they have ever had before. The number of bars maybe smaller now, but, that's just because some of them have been closed down for illegal practices, they didn't close down because business was bad.

This program has been bad for the community in every decent respect. A number of the local girls who married braceros have been deserted, left behind. It has turned out in many cases, that the men were already married in Mexico, and were committing bigamy by marrying again in this country. But, of course, after they went back to Mexico there was nothing that could be done about it. Then there have been lots of affairs between the nations and local girls which didn't end in marriage. The saddest part about this is that some of these were good girls before. They have been ruined by the nationals; they have had bastard children and everything under the sun. When you really look at it, I suppose, you can't blame either the girls or the braceros themselves. The local boys were away in armed forces. The braceros were the only men around and under those circumstances they were naturally going to get together with the local

girls and pretty much take over the town.

I will say that things used to be worse then they are now. They used to have a bunch of braceros living in some bar right here in the middle of the community, you can imagine what that led to. Since they moved them all out into the one camp a couple of miles from town, things haven't been so bad. We used to have constant fights and killings between the braceros and the local boys who were too young to be in the Army and after the was over things really heated up when the local boys began to come back from the Army.

As far as wages and so forth are concerned, well, the braceros have had a profound impact here also. They have most certainly tended to lower the wages in this area. The growers are able to bet away with paying the bracero precisely the same wages that they have ever since 1945; that is from 75¢ to $1 an hour. Now, as you know, the cost of living has more than doubled since 1945. Wages in every other idustry have risen proportionately, but not farm labor, they are stuck. The result is that the overall atandard of living of the community has suffered since this community is so dependent upon agriculture. Another important result is that local families are being forced to move out. There has been lots of this and it is still going on. As far as I have been able to observe, the families which are the hardest hit are the large families, which have been accustomed to depending on the whole family to work. They can't make a go of it now, because of the low wages and because the ranchers aren't willing to give them work. Braceros are well liked by the ranchers, because they are willing to work harder; they are willing to work beyond all sense and reason; they work themselves to death almost literally. I suppose that this is what they are used to in Mexico. I have heard many violent complaints from members of this community on this score. Many people are very bitter about the favoritism that is being shown toward the braceros by the growers. People feel that they served

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these growers long and faithfully, and now are being left behind. They don't feel this just or fair and I agree with them. I have worked in the fields around this town myself.

Let me give you an example of the sort of thing that is going on. For all the years that I can remember, the vineyards which were raising grapes for the wineries in the area, used to be worked in this way: Pickers would put the grapes into boxes and leave them at the sides of the roads that run through the vineyards. Every half day or so, a truck would drive through manned by four men; the driver, and 3 swampers, as they are called. One swamper would stand up in the body of the truck; the other two, one on each side would toss up the boxes of grapes from the roadside; he would dump them into the truck bed and then return the empty boxes to the roadside. Sometimes, if the picking was unusually heavy, they would have more than 3 swampers. The swampers worked at a regular wage, which was a pretty good wage. Let me tell you how it works now: When the truck drives through the vineyards, there is just the driver, he may or may not be a bracero. There are no more swampers. When the truck approaches, the braceros who are picking the grapes have to stop what they are doing, and run to the road, which may be a 100 yards or so away; and do their own swamping. They have to dump their own boxes of grapes into the truck. In effect, they do this without pay, because their only pay consists of piece-rates for the picking.

I am really worried about the results of this program on the local economy, because it strikes very close to home. My boy works in the building industry. As you may know constructions is slowing down, it is just about reached the saturation point; soon it may stop altogether. What's my boy going to do then? He used to wrok in the fields, but he can't go back to the fields as things stand now, because the braceros have it all sewed up. No matter what some people may tell you, the local people

would be willing to work in the fields and orchards, if the braceros were not here; and I will tell you why. Because the growers would have to raise their wages. They can easily afford to do this with the profits they are making, and this is all the inducement that you would need to lure back plenty of locals to do the work that needs to be done.

Do I think the program should be continued? What do you think, Mac? The only people that feel that it should be continued are the people like the bar owners, who are pfofiting from it personally. Incidentally I have heard numerous complaints from the braceros themselves over conditions that they have encountered here; such as food, housing, wages, and so forth.